Growing Up Stalgren

by David Blackledge

Sleepovers with Dave K

With David Knapp living the next street up, and with only a city-owned empty lot between us, we frequently would do sleepovers at each others' house. I remember sleeping at his place frequently, and if it was on a Saturday night, I would usually join his family at church the next day. I was raised with only secular Easter and secular Christmas, so religion was a bit of an alien mystery to me, and I would be uncomfortable even saying "God" or "Jesus" at his Sunday school classroom.

Ants at home plate.

I don't think I ever graduated to playing actual little league, but I did play tee-ball with the baseball sitting on a kid-height tee where we would try to swing straight enough to make the ball move in the right direction. One such game was at a school where a red ant hill had been formed right at home plate. After a turn at bat I found myself rushing to pull my pants down and get the stinging red ants out of my pants.

Centipedes and scouting.

With a house near the foothills and its open space preserve, we often had little critters in our back yard, including the occasional scary looking bug. The worst came when we decided to build a back wall for our yard (before that the rear was just open to the city property behind the house). In our back yard was a large collection of gigantic boulders that were great for climbing, but did not lend themselves well to a wall getting built.

The equipment came in and moved the boulders around to make room for the wall, but one of them came with a surprise. We were able to come out and look at the spot where the boulder sat, and there was a full nest of centipedes of all sizes crawling around. Dozens of them at least. For years after that, we would get a large centipede wandering into the house. One time trapped in the bathtub, another time I woke up with a line of paired welts down my back likely because one got in my bed and got trapped between the bed and the small of my back.

For the portion of the wall that crossed an immovable boulder, wrought iron fencing was mounted on the boulder, and my parents had them install a gate in the fence at a common spot where we would walk through. Since David's mother Alice Knapp would come to get David K. or talk to my Mom by walking through that path, my parents added a tiny plaque to it dubbing it the "Alice Knapp Memorial Gate." She frequently took that path in conjunction with scouting meetings. My mother was our Cub Scout troop leader including most of my school friends, usually holding the meeting in our kitchen. I did eventually get to Webelos ("We'll Be Loyal Scouts") but never actually entered Boy Scouts.

Collet Park fights

In elementary school I had a really short temper. I frequently got in fist fights, usually with older kids. One fight was on the bus that was about to take us home. An older kid I often had problems with took the pencil from me that I was using to work on my homework, so I went after him and we ended up on the floor of the aisle throwing punches. We both ended up in the principal's office, and when we were asked who started it and nobody spoke up, I eventually started to say "I guess it was my fault for finding that pencil on the playground in the first place." If I hadn't found the pencil, I wouldn't have been doing my homework with it, and the other guy wouldn't have stolen it… sure. I'm pretty sure the principal saw through that and I didn't get in trouble.

I also remember an extensive fight on the far side of the playground with an older kid. I recall feeling like I won that one, but I ended up with a black eye when he kicked me in the face while he was on the ground

There were some kids who knew about my temper and made that their fun. One in particular would send me into a rage by calling me "David WHITEledge!" and I'd chase him around the playground. I never could capture that one. I believe he's the one who ran into his classroom, and I stopped at the doorway, unable to pass through the not-my-classroom force field. So I just started screaming at him from the doorway to come back out. Mostly everybody ignored me, but one student (Dana Langdon, I believe) came up and started yelling at me to go with some typical elementary school argument like "we have to be quiet now!" or similar.

I recall that kind of insult was common in the elementary school since we weren't privy to more adult phrases. My go-to insult was to call a boy "Mister MACINTOSH!" (or Mrs. if it was a girl). I have no idea where that came from.

Transformers

Since I first saw ads for Transformers and GoBots toys, I loved them. I had my Dad take me to the toy store to buy one and I agonized for quite a while over which particular robot to choose. My first such toy was the GoBot "Tank" which simply folded in half and you jammed his gun into his back. My first actual Transformer was "Hound" the military jeep which always held a special place for me. I agonized over my next robot whenever I had some money and time at the mall. I would spend my entire time there analyzing each available Transformer and what I would get for the price, often not buying anything because I ran out of time and refused to spend my money without being certain.

When I got one home, I would as carefully as possible open the side, then open the bubble pack mounted on its cardboard, trying to keep everything intact such that when I was done playing I could put it all back together as if it were still on the store shelf. Consciously I mainly thought of this as "what if I have to take it back to the store" for which I also kept the receipts. I didn't think of it as a "future value" thing at all (if so, I wouldn't have applied the stickers from their sticker sheets!) This is also shown by the fact that I would gladly purchase off-brand version of Transformers I wanted if it was a good deal and wasn't significantly different from the name-brand one, for instance I bought the Constructicons as a single boxed set, likely at the flea market, from a generic manufacturer. I could never have justified buying all of them separately. I also

scoured garage sales and greedily examined my mom's storage locker auctions trying to get my hands on more of them. I took just as good of care of the off-brand versions, but today they're worth a fraction of the value of the name-brand products. However, I have a closet full of the toys that would likely be valued at a few thousand dollars today.

I also enjoyed and took the same care of similar products like MASK vehicles that transformed into different battle-mode vehicles. Probably my favorite was a Robotech Cyclone - a large toy with a human in a riding suit paired with a futuristic motorcycle. The motorcyle transforms into a flying battle suit for the rider. I played with that so much that if I were to try and transform it one more time, it would probably snap in half because it developed stress marks and cracks in the thinner plastic pieces.

My biggest purchase was Fortress Maximus. I set my mind to it, decided I had to have it, mentally prepared myself for spending $100 of my own money on it, and tracked down the only toy store in town that had it - on the other side of town, west of the river. I got out the cash, had them put one on hold for me, got a ride down there from my Dad, and returned home a happy kid.

Whenever Dee Schelling came over to visit Mom, she always showed fascination at my latest transformer and amazement at how I had the transformation memorized.

Halloween

Halloween was always, for me, a creative outlet. I loved dreaming up and trying to create my own costumes when I was old enough that my mother wouldn't come up with them and paint my face as she saw fit. I decided to make a Transformer costume out of cardboard. I modeled it after my first Transformer, Hound the military jeep, so I had a box for my upper body painted green, with a small addition painted silver for the radiator portion, then a green waist portion ("loin cloth") with an Autobot logo I made on paper and stuck to it, then tied it around my waist with string. I believe I also made small boxes as foot covers, and probably a helmet of some sort. Finally I had a large thick tube plus a paper towel tube and some more straight pieces of cardboard assembled together and painted silver to mount on the shoulder as Hound's rocket launcher. I had to reinforce the mount with popsicle sticks to get it to stand up.

Our elementary school had a yearly costume parade where everybody could come to school with costumes and march through all the classrooms to show off. I wore my Hound costume to that parade and barely made it through doorways, and did suffer a fall or two since I couldn't see my feet. In the process I broke some of the costume, but it still served me well at Halloween. Some time later, I came home from school to find it sitting on the curb for the trash man - my Mom didn't want it kept taking up the large space it took in the house. I was pretty upset and recovered the waist cover with the logo and the rocket launcher. We didn't realize until later that we never even got a photo of the finished product, but I do have one or both recovered pieces of the costume, still.

Halloween was also a difficult time for me because of what I now believe were allergies. They often developed into a secondary infection such that most years I ended up sick with strep throat. One year the timing was so bad that I insisted on going trick-or-treating anyhow because I had my costume all ready to go as the headless horseman (mainly a cape tied around the top of my head, and carrying an actual carved

jack-o-lantern under my arm). My parents allowed me to do just our street and come home, which was a good thing since I was exhausted before I finished and my arm was aching from carrying that heavy pumpkin.

Perhaps I was inspired about Halloween from our previous community in Las Vegas, Nevada. There the neighbors had a front yard that I remember as a grassy hill where they set up a guillotine and would drop the blade and chop off a head as we approached the house. I remember it being convincing that a person laid down in it, but don't remember being scared at the spectacle.

After School

Elementary school's after school care was at the church down Copper, probably just for convenience for mom. I believe they bussed me from Collet Park in their own bus. One little girl there I remember vaguely, I think she was part of the gifted program, too. One time one of the children drove a staple into him/herself which was a lot of excitement.

I remember going with Mom one time on one of her Promotions jobs to what I believe was the McDonalds at Gibson and San Mateo. Mom got me food and when they offered her the current promotion materials (like Monopoly or something) she asked them to explain it, then later she would report back how they did.